

Hoof Care and Ranch Horses

Edward L. Johnson

Associate Professor
Department of Animal Sciences
UF/IFAS
Gainesville, FL

It is not a requirement that horses be shod, however, proper and routine hoof care will help to insure healthy feet as well as help prevent lameness. Proper hoof care can certainly help reduce the incidence of soft tissue injuries. The primary functional reasons for shoeing any horse are to protect the feet, provide traction, and alter gaits. Recommended intervals for hoof care can vary, but average five to six weeks. The interval should not extend beyond eight weeks.

Because of the environment many ranch horses live and/or work in, they are prone to both the common foot diseases many horses are susceptible to as well as some that are less frequently seen in the pleasure horse population. The nature of their activity puts them on terrain that may cause soft tissue damage because of sprains, strains, tears, lacerations, and punctures. Additionally, they are frequently in wet or swampy environmental conditions which can precipitate diseases caused by organisms harbored in water or moist environments. Moisture helps propagate such diseases as thrush, canker, and pithiosis. Too much moisture in the foot can cause the foot to be too soft resulting in cracks and abscesses. Also a condition commonly known as “scratches” or “grease heels” is exacerbated by moisture as is dermatitis of the lower legs. Both of these conditions can be very aggravating to treat and can cause mild lameness.

Thrush is a condition affecting the frog portion of the foot whereby anaerobic organisms are trapped along the collateral and/or central sulci of the frog. Degeneration can occur in any part or all of the frog tissue. This disease can vary in severity from being a nuisance disease to causing lameness. Thrush is relatively easy to treat in the milder

stages, but can be very difficult to control in the more advanced stages. In severe cases involving the central sulcus, treatment can be extensive and the damage irreversible, which creates a situation where the horse is much more prone to thrush due to the resulting conformation of the posterior portion of the foot.

Two diseases that seem to be related to wet and/or filthy environments are canker and pithiosis (also known as phycomycosis, swamp cancer, leeches, and kunkers). Both these diseases are granulomatous entities that are very difficult to control and treat. Surgery is almost always required in the treatment process and in many instances, multiple surgeries will be necessary. Many to most horses will not survive pithiosis of the foot or at least not be sound if they do survive. Pithiosis can affect nearly any part of the body.

Canker is associated with draft horses, but occurs frequently in cases where a horse injures a frog and is living in moist or filthy conditions. Canker is a chronic hypertrophy of the horn producing tissues of the foot including the frog, sole, and, at times, the wall. Canker can be cured, but is very time consuming and frequently requires surgery. Ranch horses are more apt to suffer from diseases such as quittor, bruised soles, abscesses, puncture wounds, wounds to the coronet band, keratomas, sidebone, ringbone, and caudal heel syndrome. Additionally, soft tissue injuries are commonplace in ranch horses. The reasons for these injuries include horses being used too intensely while being physically unfit, and lack of or improper hoof care resulting in excess strain on ligaments, tendons, suspensories, and hoof structures. Additionally, working over/on terrain that doesn't provide the best traction can certainly cause problems. Selecting shoes that help increase

traction is beneficial to the horse and may reduce the number of days a horse must be laid up.

If you want to maximize the usefulness and

productivity of the ranch horse, paying attention to their feet and legs and either keeping them physically fit or at least getting them in shape before you need them will pay big dividends.

Notes:

Notes: